

City Directories: Far More Than Names and Addresses

By Judy Janes

March 9, 2022

City directories are a valuable, but often under-utilized resource for genealogical research. A directory can provide invaluable information that might not be available in anywhere else. City directories may predate the recording of vital records. Searching city directories isn't an exact science. The person compiling the information may have recorded a name phonetically, and in his own handwriting. This method leaves room for error just as in census records. Be creative in your research.

Reasons to Use City Directories:

1. A city directory will indicate the approximate date your ancestor arrived or moved from a city.
2. Your ancestor's occupation will usually be listed. Sometimes the actual name of the employer is also reported, or the name of his or her own business.
3. When an individual disappears from a directory it may indicate his/her death, or the possible marriage of a woman.
4. Women may be listed as "widow," and sometimes the name of her deceased husband is also given.
5. A directory can help determine when an immigrant arrived in this country. This may narrow the period of time to search for immigration records and passenger lists.
6. Family connections can be determined by examining all of the same surname entries and looking for other individuals residing at the same address. This is an excellent method to trace descendants.
7. Check for listings of married daughters if her married surname is known. Was the young couple living with her parents or perhaps her husband's?
8. A directory will help expedite the search for church records where marriages and baptisms may be found.
9. Check lists of members of fraternal organizations, societies, city and county officials, and any other supplemental lists published in each directory.
10. Check the list of cemeteries to locate where an ancestor might be buried.
11. Street Directories are arranged in alphabetical or numerical order and will list individuals living at a particular address. These are also valuable to see who your ancestor's neighbors were.

Search Techniques

1. Check various spellings of your ancestor's surname. Just as with census records, the canvasser might have recorded names phonetically. Handwriting may have also been misread by the typesetter. If the resident spoke a foreign language, it is imperative to check for alternative spellings.
2. If you can't locate a directory for your city of interest, look for the nearest large city. One year Ventura, and all the other cities in the county, was listed under the title *Ventura City and County Directory*. Some directories include multiple counties, so you might also want to search in neighboring counties.
3. Search all years available, and everyone with the same surname. You may find other family members moving in and out of your ancestor's household. This will also give you a record of changing occupations, and possibly employers. Search the lists of organizations, societies, etc., for your ancestor's name. If you find your ancestor listed as a member or any organization, search for photos and organizational records in local libraries, historical societies, museums, and archives. Newspaper research would probably yield much more information about individual organizations, their meetings, events, conventions, etc.
4. If you have a clergyman's name on a marriage record, but don't know the church with which he was affiliated, look at the index of churches in the directory. They frequently list the clergymen. You might also want to check under the name of the clergyman to see if the church is mentioned. This may provide an important clue in finding baptismal records, too.
5. The directory should provide a list of abbreviations. It's a good idea to save a copy for later reference.
6. If your ancestor's employer is indicated, check the directory for the "List of Advertisers." These lists may be arranged alphabetically, or by type of business such as "Hotels," "Blacksmiths," "Grocers," etc. In this way you may be able to find a wonderful advertisement for your ancestor's business or employer.
7. When you have determined the actual or approximate date of death of your ancestor, but don't know where he/she is buried, refer to the list of cemeteries. This may help narrow your search. You might also want to look for a list of "Funeral Homes."
8. Copy the list of schools. If there are many schools listed, use a map to find the closest school to your ancestor's place of residence. There may be class photos or yearbooks available online through local libraries, historical societies, museums, and subscription sites.
9. If your family disappears from a directory, don't automatically assume they moved. As with censuses, they may have been missed, and will reappear a year or two later. Research several more years, again being careful to check all spellings.
10. There may be more than one publisher producing directories for particularly large cities. If this is the case, search each publisher's directory every year. Different information may be contained in each one.

11. Actual residential listings may have been gathered many months prior to a directory's actual publication. Therefore, they might be slightly outdated.
12. Always check for individuals in the supplemental list of "Additional Names, Changes, Removals, etc."
13. Search the *same directory* on every website that offers a digitized copy. The OCR isn't perfect, and you may get different results with each.
14. Beginning with the late 1900s search digital newspaper collections for all the addresses where your ancestors lived. You may discover an event where a family name was reported incorrectly, or not at all.

Sources and Some Items of Special Interest

Ventura County Museum of History

Prime Sources of California and Nevada Local History: 151 Rare and Important City, County, and State Directories 1850-1906 by Richard Quebedeaux (Spokane, WA. The Arthur Clark Co., 1992). This limited-edition book lists all directories published with a description of contents and repositories. Call #016.9794

Hand-book and Directory of San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Kern, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, & San Diego Counties San Francisco, Comp. And Pub. By L.L. Paulson, 1875). <https://archive.org/details/handbookdirecto00paul/page/n5/mode/2up?q=ventura>

Homesekers and Tourists Guide and Ventura County Directory, Illustrated 1898-99. This gem contains photos and illustrations of individuals, buildings, ranches, schools, and churches throughout Ventura County. Call # 917.9492

E. P. Foster Library

1908-9 Ventura City and County Directory (Los Angeles, Los Angeles City Directory Co., 1908). This countywide directory includes the Ventura County taxpayer's Assessment Roll 1908-9 of real estate and personal property. Call # 917.9492 VENTU

The museum and Foster Library have an excellent collection of city directories through 1982.

Los Angeles Public Library:

The History and Genealogy Dept. has over 5000 city directories on microfiche, microfilm, and shelved books. The directory library is difficult to search, but this will reveal what is available. <https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/lapl-indexes/city-directories-index>

Los Angeles city and regional directories, and phone directories online:
<https://rescarta.lapl.org/ResCarta-Web/jsp/RcWebBrowseCollections.jsp>

Bibliography

City and State Directories in Print 1990-91 by Julie E. Towell and Charles B. Montney (Pub. By Gale Research).

Personal Name Index to the 1856 City Directories of California by Nathan C. Parker (Gale Research, Vol. 10). E. P. Foster Library, Call #929.3794

Internet Sources

The Ancestor Hunt: <https://theancestorhunt.com/directories.html>

LDS Genealogy: <https://ldsancestry.com/city-directories/>

Internet Archive: www.archive.org

Google Books: <https://books.google.com>

HathiTrust: www.hathitrust.org

Digital Public Library of America: <https://dp.la/>

Don's List: A dated site, but he also has some foreign directories.
<http://www.donslist.net/PGHLookups/Dir1Win.shtml>

FamilySearch: www.familysearch.org

FamilySearch Wiki: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Directories

Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/search/?in=&q=city+directory&new=true>

Libraries, historical societies, museums, archives

Google search

Ancestry: www.ancestry.com \$\$

Fold3: \$\$ www.fold3.com Free through some libraries

MyHeritage: \$\$ www.myheritage.com

Commonly Used Abbreviations in City Directories

GenealogyInTime Magazine: <http://www.genealogyintime.com/dictionaries/list-of-occupation-abbreviations-page-a.html>